

## Mystery Wreck Explored by Archaeologists

*Cheva Heck, FKNMS Communications Manager*



**A team of archaeologists surveys an unidentified shipwreck in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Researchers believe the wreck may be centuries old and hope to learn more about its history through additional fieldwork. (Photo: Jeff Anderson)**

Archaeologists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the State of Florida conducted a 10-day mission to document an unknown shipwreck — possibly centuries old — in shallow water off Marathon in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The team hoped to obtain information that will help them identify the mystery wreck and add a new chapter to the maritime history of the Florida Keys.

“The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary welcomes this project as a chance to learn more about a potentially significant Keys shipwreck, share that knowledge with the community and better plan for the site’s protection,” said LCDR Stephen Beckwith, FKNMS Upper Region manager. “Protecting our maritime heritage and sharing the stories behind shipwrecks with the American public is an important part of the sanctuary’s mission.”

Joined by sanctuary staff, the archaeologists mapped the ballast pile, exposed ship timbers and the coral on the site and documented the site using video and still photography. To assist with dating and possible identification of the shipwreck, the team took small samples of wood from the remaining timbers. The team also surveyed the area seaward of the wreck for additional maritime heritage resources.

Funding for the project was provided through a mini-grant from the NOAA Maritime Heritage Program. Both the sanctuary and the State of Florida provided personnel, equipment and other resources to support the project. The field work took place in late June 2005.

“The mystery wreck site is unique because many of the ship’s timber are exposed beneath the ballast pile,” said Roger Smith, Ph.D., state underwater archaeologist. “Due to the size of both the ship’s timbers and the ballast pile, this appears to have been a large vessel. We believe it may be historically significant, possibly even predating the Spanish fleet that was decimated by a ferocious storm in the Straits of Florida in 1733.”

The National Marine Sanctuaries Act charges the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary with managing archaeological and historical resources in its waters to protect the public’s interest and prohibits disturbing, removing or possessing artifacts without a permit. NOAA and the State of Florida work together to protect and interpret maritime heritage sites in state waters of the sanctuary.

***Note:** This article appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Sounding Line. For more information, visit: <http://floridakeys.noaa.gov>.*



**Sanctuary Coral Restoration Monitoring Biologist Jeff Anderson assists Resource Manager Harold Hudson with the drill stabilizing structure used to core the star coral *Montastrea faveolata*. The core was taken from a coral that grew on top of the wreck pile and will undergo growth rate analysis to assist with the ship’s age identification. (Photo: Brenda Altmeier)**